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## GOP Candidates for Governor Offer Contrasting Priorities

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Three months before the Virginia primaries, the remaining Republican gubernatorial candidates are not backing away from the issues they've used to define their campaigns.

For Ed Gillespie, who has led nearly every major poll during the race, that has meant fixing the Commonwealth's economy. While incumbent Gov. Terry McAuliffe (D), who is barred by the state constitution from seeking a second term, has pointed to Virginia's 3.9 percent unemployment rate as an indicator of economic vitality under his watch, Gillespie has said its more indicative of people leaving the workforce because of a poor economy. Speaking at the 2017 Fairfax County Republican Committee Straw Poll, he said Virginia is one of the bottom 10 states in economic growth in the past fiscal quarter.

"That is infuriating," Gillespie said during his March 25 address to more than 300 Fairfax County Republican voters before the straw poll. "We should be first in the nation, and we can be with the right policies."

In his address, Gillespie outlined his ideas to enhance Virginian's economy through his newly-released economic plan. It calls for 10 percent across-the-board tax cuts for all Virginians, which he said would create 53,000 new private sector jobs and \$1,300 a year in savings for the average family in Virginia. Democrats have slammed the propels, saying they would disproportionately benefit wealthy individuals while gutting funding for essential government services.

Gillespie, a former national GOP chair and Virginia Senate candidate who has never held elected office, is considered a moderate among the three in this race. Gillespie said he would also do better than the two Democratic gubernatorial candidates, incumbent Lt. Gov. Ralph Northam and former congressman Ralph Perriello, who he referred to as "Left and Lefter."

"We can't divide our way to greater property," Gillespie said in referencing to the two Democratic candidates. "I will unify our party and I will appeal to all Virginians in November and I'll be a governor of all Virginians."

A Northern Virginia resident, he won the non-scientific straw poll with 55.8 percent of the vote.

In his address, Wagner emphasized transportation, a divisive issue for some Republican voters. A state senator from Virginia Beach, he was one of the chief supporters of former Gov. Bob McDonnell's landmark transportation bill that funded major infrastructure projects, including roads and Metrorail expansion in Northern Virginia. Notwithstanding the substantive value of these improvements, the tax increases to pay for the projects has drawn the ire of some hard line conservatives.

He also came out against private-public partnerships in transportation funding, saying they are less cost-effective than government projects and create more tolls. These partnerships have often been praised by elected officials from both parties in Northern Virginia, where they have freed up government money for other projects in the region.

"I'm going to tell you a lot of things you don't want to hear, but I'm going to tell you the cold hard facts," Wagner said.

Despite possible divisions among Republicans over transportation, Wagner also touted his appeal across the Commonwealth. He said he would carry Hampton Roads and that no candidate could win a general election without that region's support. As a Republican in a district that voted for Democratic presidential candidates in the past three elections, Wagner's seat was a primary target by state Democrats in the last election cycle. Wagner won re-election handily, and has represented Virginia Beach in the General Assembly as a Delegate or Senator since 1992. Though several of his Hampton Roads colleagues recently endorsed Gillespie, Wagner has said his record in government, not endorsements, is a better measure of his electability statewide.

Stewart contrasted himself as the no-holds-bared conservative in the race. He has become best known for his hard line stance on immigration and architect of one of the nation's most rigorous crackdowns on illegals as Chairman of Prince William County's Board of Supervisors.

"Why am I so mean against illegal immigrants? Because they're committing crimes against our families, that's why," Stewart fulminated during his address. "We need to protect every Virginian, no matter what county they live in. We're going to protect you and your families from the ravages of criminal, illegal immigrants."

Since 2008, more than 7,000 illegal aliens are estimated to have left Prince William County, which has a population of more than 400,000. A study by the county in 2010 determined that government efforts against immigration have lead to a decrease in violent crimes, but little change in crime rate overall. Multiple nationwide studies and research conducted by non-profits and think tanks, including the libertarian Cato Institute, have found immigrants commit crimes at lesser rates than natives.

Stewart's sentiments echo some of President Donald Trump's proposals on immigration, which have drawn large-scale protests in Northern Virginia and nationwide. He was fired as Trump's Virginia state chair last fall for leading a rally outside GOP headquarters demanding greater party resources for the candidate. Stewart said he expected there was a good chance he'd be fired by Trump because of his history of terminating his employees, and was proud to have worked on the campaign.

Like Trump, Stewart has invigorated a vocal crowd of conservative Republicans, and received the loudest cheers of any candidate at the straw poll. That didn't correlate to votes from party members in one of the state's least conservative district, as Stewart finished second to Gillespie. Wagner finished a distant third.